

UO science outreach program helps topics come to life for kids



Story Published: Feb 28, 2007 at 5:32 PM PDT
KVAL.com
Eugene, Oregon

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Who says science in school has to be dry and dull?

We met some talented graduate students from the University of Oregon that are taking the monotony out of botany, and the mystery out of chemistry.

It's science time at Lundy Elementary School in Lowell. But there's not a book to be found...just milk, pineapple juice, water and Sunny Delight drink.

"We deflated a balloon, didn't we. That was pretty cool," says once-a-week science teacher, Mary Smeller. Even though she's not a teacher by trade, the UO chemistry graduate student has the class's full attention.

"Dr. Mary", as they call her, is on her second year in the University's K-12 Science Outreach Program.

UO graduate students go to elementary and middle schools in Oregon to teach about chemical reactions, density and solubility. The graduate fellows also bring science kits with materials to aid the lessons.

At Lunday School today (Wednesday), they did a chemical reaction experiment mixing milk and pineapple juice. As the milk went into curdling-mode, Smeller told the class, "Well I think this would definitely upset your stomach."

The chemistry graduate explains, "We're trying to get teachers to teach science as an inquiry, as a process, instead of well, this is a fact and this is a fact."

Lundy School 6th grade teacher, Jeanette Jacobson, says Smeller, coming from the world of science, has instant credibility with the kids. Jacobson adds, "She's doing this for a living; so it's just not a picture of a person in a lab coat with wild hair, making up formulas. She makes it personal."

The Science Outreach Program is truly a win-win situation. The grad students gain some valuable classroom training and the kids get to do a lot of cool science. 6th grader Michael Waff points out, "We've done some cool experiments and things, like making ice cream with liquid nitrogen and stuff."

Classmate Sydney Clayton tells KVAL, "We put a balloon in the liquid nitrogen and it deflated, and then when you took it out and left it on the table it got bigger."

Though she's headed for a college teaching career, "Dr. Mary" says the payoff right now with the 6th grade class, is huge. "I have always loved it when people get it. That moment when they're like, oh, that's how that works."

The Science Outreach Program is funded with a grant from the National Science Foundation. 27 schools in Eugene, Bend, Sisters and other locations have been helped through the program.